

## Extract from Chapter Three

2018: England – London

‘One point eight million, five hundred thousand!’ rang out across the room, interrupting Fitzwilliam’s final ‘gone’ and his gavel blow to end the auction. Every head swivelled round to see the new player lowering his paddle.

‘A-ha. We have... a new bidder! One point... eight million, five hundred... thousand, from you, sir?’ His hesitant gavel pointed at Victor, who nodded once.

‘Well done, my boy; your timing was impeccable,’ whispered a jovial Xavier. ‘A bit near the cuff, but impeccable,’ he praised. ‘Just make sure you get it!’

Fitzwilliam stared at the previous lady bidder, expecting her paddle to be raised once more, but she shook her head at Victor’s £1.85 million last bid.

‘We have our last bid? All done, everyone?’ He glanced briefly at the lady bidder, hoping she had finished, since he really didn’t feel well. ‘One point eight million, five hundred thousand... Going once, going twice... Sold to bidder fifteen!’ Fitzwilliam’s gavel came down with gusto on its block – the *thrack* of the sale resounding around the high-ceilinged room followed by another eruption of clapping from his audience. The successful bidder sat indifferently and without emotion in the middle of the auction room, as Fitzwilliam pointed at Victor with his gavel and announced, ‘Sold to bidder fifteen for one point eight-five million pounds – an... absolutely... new record for this type... of furniture. *Congratulations... sir!*’

Victor had done it, but it had cost his employer dear; Xavier grimaced at the loss of so much money disappearing from his account and the ‘twist of the knife’ when Mandeville’s percentage was added on to the bill, rubbing salt into his already aching wound.

At the lectern, Fitzwilliam became motionless, with his face becoming extremely pale and his eyes unfocused and staring at the floor.

There were a multitude of frantic screams from the front rows of seats as Gareth Fitzwilliam let out a sorrowful groan before forcefully gripping his chest, then crumpling in a contorted heap on the platform and dying in an instant.

Xavier jumped up and stared in fury at Fitzwilliam’s lifeless body, worrying not one iota about the auctioneer’s welfare, but whether the auction was void and would have to be restarted at another time. Victor was angry too, having quickly appreciated, with the auctioneer’s forced retirement and listening to Xavier’s concerns about the validity of the auction, that his near-deaf left ear and pummelled brain might have to endure another auction in the near future.

Members of the audience began to rise from their seats as Gareth’s colleagues raced to his side. ‘*Phone for an ambulance*’ was shrieked above the growing commotion of moving seats, loud anxious talking on phones and the overlaying sounds from a wide assortment of ringtones as bidders received and sent texts concerning their clients losing their item and what had just happened in front of them.

One bidder slumped back in his seat, fuming that the auction had ended in such a manner – he’d won *his vargueño* – it was in the bag, surely? *How dare the auctioneer die after carrying out that final act of using his gavel to hit the block*, was the thought that seared through his brain. *The final result must be valid – they wouldn’t dare declare the auction void, just because the auctioneer had died, would they?* his brain worried.

Adjacent seats emptied around him as he watched one of the bidders push forward, proclaiming she was a doctor and to let her through. Xavier couldn’t help himself: he shouted with a clear and superior tone, ‘*He’s dead*. Can’t you see that? He’s had a heart attack; the heat was too much for

him – *I don't need a doctor to tell me that.*' He finished his outburst with a haughty laugh emanating from his grinning mouth.

Everyone stopped moving and a loud silence fell on the room; everyone turned towards Xavier with various accented and finely pronounced words of, '*Shame on you*' – '*You heartless creature*' – '*You beast*' – '*You should be ashamed of yourself*' and, from a plain speaking Northerner, '*You fucking callous bastard!*' – all thrown at him with venomous intent.

Xavier reacted as he always did when his mind was unable to comprehend people not understanding him – he shrugged his shoulders without a whisker of embarrassment on his still smirking face, rose from his seat and moved with confident strides towards the exit doors of the silent and stunned auction room. That silence was short-lived as Xavier slammed the double doors behind him, cascading and reverberating noise into every corner of the room, leaving his disgusted but astounded audience wondering who heartless Bidder 36 really was.

Victor sat slumped in his chair, his mind reeling with derogatory adjectives to describe his boss's behaviour and downright stupidity, especially by making himself centre of attention to the whole auction-house audience. Bidder 15 should have been pleased with his performance and the culmination of 'his' purchase for his boss, but he felt the complete opposite; a feeling that was to stay with him as he journeyed back to Xavier's yacht, anchored a quarter of a mile off Hamstead, located on the northwest side of the Isle of Wight – not the quietest location for Xavier's tastes, he had decided, but with sufficient privacy for his needs whilst the *vargueño* was made his by Victor.

Two hours after the auction, the actual new owner of Valdés's 16th-century *vargueño* was ensconced on his private deck atop his yacht. Thankfully for Victor, the sale of the *vargueño* was valid, and even better for his left ear, Xavier had removed his microphone before erupting in hysterical and ecstatic joy.

Unfortunately for the crew of *Madeline-B*, Xavier's yacht was not as sound-proofed as the owner thought, and they too could hear the muffled but audible sounds of Xavier's demented cries of elation filtering through each deck level, issuing forth from their employer's private lounge.